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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TEL AVIV 000076

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SUBJECT: NASSER YUSIF ON POSSIBLE SECURITY ROLE

REF: JERUSALEM 4947

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer, per 1.4 (B) and (D).

ConGen Jerusalem cleared this message.

1. (SBU) Summary: National Security Force BG Nasser Yusif told poloffs recently that, if called upon to join an Abu Mazen government as interior minister, he would bring the green-uniform public security forces, Force 17, and the naval or coastal police under his personal operational control, and then, subject to concurrence by the political leadership, focus his attention on the relatively "easy" job of cleaning up the West Bank. Only after order is re-imposed there -- within 20 days -- would Yusif turn his attention to Gaza, setting up his headquarters there "until the job is done." In a drop-by, the Ambassador cited the need for progress in the investigation of the October 15, 2003, attack on U.S. personnel in Gaza. He stressed that although the United States stands ready to assist Abu Mazen, USG security concerns make it extremely difficult to operate effectively on the ground in PA territory. Yusif agreed that law and order must be job number one for the PA, and concurred with the Ambassador's assessment that the Palestinian people themselves need security if their society is to grow. He predicted that security during the January 9 presidential election will pose little problem because Abu Mazen maintains such a commanding lead in the race. The real challenge, he stressed, will come during the March municipal elections, May PLC elections, and August Fatah elections, where no one faction has a commanding lead and where militants may choose to press their cases by violence. Accordingly, PA security forces must gain control by March. End Summary.

We Need Progress in the Investigation

2. (C) Pol/C and Poloff met at length recently with National Security Force (NSF) Major General Nasser Yusif, ranking military officer in the Palestinian Authority security establishment, and NSF Brigadier General Samir Siksek, during a primarily social call beginning at the Embassy and then moving to Pol/C's home. (Note: Yusif is the number two ranking military officer within the PLO, ranking behind only Tunis-based MG Ahmed Afani, who, at least until Yasser Arafat's death, held the title of deputy chief of staff to Yasser Arafat. Yusif's membership on the Fatah Central Committee makes him the de facto more senior officer.) During a brief drop-by, the Ambassador reiterated the need for progress in the investigation into the October 15, 2003 attack on Embassy personnel and expressed his hope that PA security efforts will have a wider, positive impact on Palestinian society as a whole. The Ambassador explained that, in the hope of an improved security situation, the Embassy is working to hold on to funds for major water projects that were put on hold following the deadly October 15, 2003 attack, after which all travel to Gaza was halted. He urged the PA to make all possible efforts to resolve the investigation and to re-impose law and order so that current U.S. funding will not be lost and future funds can be effectively utilized.

Open to Possibilities

3. (C) Yusif said he had refused then-Chairman Arafat's request in 2003 to become minister of interior because there was, at that time, no authority attached to the position. Now, "if asked, I will serve," he said, adding that "our desire to work must be coupled by your (the United States') desire to help." With little or no law and order evident in the streets, Yusif said, security is the Palestinians' number one concern today. He added that during a recent visit to Gaza, he had been protected by "a battalion" of troops and he could not even go to pray in the mosque in Gaza City without armed guards. During his several years as senior NSF commander in Gaza in the mid and late '90s, the religiously observant Yusif attended daily prayers with little or no escort. For the first time, he said, there are murders, rapes, and problems with narcotics in Gaza.

Israel Sets Palestinian Priorities

14. (C) The GOI, Yusif said, will be setting PA security priorities in the coming months by virtue of the demands Israel makes of the Palestinians. Should he be appointed interior minister, Yusuf said, his own preference would be to focus his attention first on the West Bank as the "easier" task that would "take 20 days" to clean up. Once that task was complete, Yusif said, he would then physically move to Gaza, staying there and personally overseeing the establishment of law and order. If Israel, however, insists that Gaza security must -- by virtue of the withdrawal, continued rocket fire into Israel, or other reasons -- come first, then Yusif said he will be forced to leave the West Bank "as is" for the time being in order to focus his full attention on Gaza. If Israel wants to test us, they will force the PA to take on Gaza first, he said. But if they want orderly, complete results, the PA will be allowed to "clean" the West Bank first. As a very first step, what Yusif referred to as the armed (presumably criminal) gangs operating in the territories must be "crushed immediately." The PA will only then, he said, be in a position to begin taking on the militants step by step, as the militants make mistakes. Yusif acknowledged that unless the PA establishes security to prevent attacks against evacuating Gaza settlers, disengagement could grind to a halt, and Palestinians could suffer heavy IDF responses to attacks.

15. (C) Yusif said he recognizes both the need for a comprehensive security operations plan "from day one," and that both the GOI and the donors will be looking for results. He acknowledged that while donors are ready and willing to assist, they want to support a strategic approach -- through a single approved, transparent, and coordinated channel -- rather than through piecemeal, often opaque efforts with individual security chiefs. Yusif indicated that the message had been received and said that the "apathy within Fatah" had come to an end. "Arafat tactics won't work for us.... Abu Mazen is very serious." He acknowledged, however, that he (Yusuf) currently has no authority to undertake such a planning and organizational effort, and that Abu Mazen cannot issue such a mandate prior to being elected PA President.

Violence in Later Elections

16. (C) Yusif said he is confident that, if appointed as interior minister, he can plan and initiate operations expeditiously, and that, while he cannot promise concrete results, he is nonetheless sure that both he and Abu Mazen will make the maximum effort. Yusif predicted that the January 9 presidential elections will pose little security problem because Abu Mazen commands such a wide lead that the election is not in doubt or up for grabs. The real challenge, he stressed, will come during the March municipal elections, the May PLC elections, and the August Fatah elections, where no one faction has a commanding lead and where militants may choose to press their cases by violence. He predicted that, absent a major security effort, those elections will not be peaceful because they involve real political competition and too many armed factions are ready to fight. Accordingly, PA security forces must gain control by March.

17. (C) Abu Mazen, he said, should make the political decision to act and then "be off the hook," leaving the details of security implementation to his subordinates. Yusif acknowledged that the March time frame is extraordinarily short. Asked whether it is realistic, he responded simply that the effort must be made. He added that the GOI, having "scrapped all mechanisms for coordination" with the PA in the past four years, is relying now only on (unspecified) personal relationships to facilitate cooperation, complicating things for the Palestinians. "Allow us to have a security establishment, not personalities," Yusif said, arguing for the re-establishment of the District Coordination Offices (DCOs) and other Palestinian-Israeli security cooperation mechanisms. Yusif said he hoped that the GOI has learned to "stay out of Palestinians affairs" and "stop trying to manipulate" the militant groups.

18. (C) Yusif added that he could not overstate the importance of the prisoner issue to the Palestinian people and to an Abu Mazen government. He differentiated between those prisoners who have conducted "military operations," who helped military operations, and who are "normal suspects." The latter group, he said, comprise the clear majority of all prisoners, and resolving their fate would leave only a very small group in jail. He estimated that the so-called normal suspects comprise some 11,500 of what he said are some 12,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. He also called for maintenance of labor flows from the territories into Israel as critical to Palestinian well-being.

19. (C) Yusif said that he has inherited the title of supreme commander of all the armed forces as most senior officer remaining in the PLO upon the death of Yasser Arafat, putting him in a unique position, if appointed interior minister, to command the respect of the various security services and begin addressing law and order. (Note: Yusif is also a Fatah Central Committee member and is religiously observant.) Fatah, he said, has decided that the interior minister position must be the ultimate security authority in the PA. The Ministry of Interior has two roles, Yusif said: one civil and one security/military. Yusif acknowledged that a trusted administrator, several of whom, he said, come readily to mind from among Fatah Revolutionary Council members, could and should be appointed to run the actual administrative and civil elements of the Ministry, allowing Yusif to focus on running the security elements.

10. (C) As he told ConGen pol chief (reftel), Yusif said he would consolidate all security-related elements into three branches under the Interior Ministry:

- the blue-uniform police, the Preventive Security Organization (PSO), and civil defense.
- the general intelligence service.
- the green-uniform national security (or public security) forces, Force 17, and the naval or coastal police (sometimes called the marines). Several other elements, such as military intelligence and special forces, that are technically part of the public security forces now but operate autonomously, and the Palestinian part of the Joint Security Committee (with Israel) would be integrated into the public security forces.

11. (C) Yusif said that in order to press ahead with what he anticipates will be the difficult task of bringing security to the territories, he would take personal operational control over the third branch, which he referred to collectively as the public security forces. These forces currently fall under the commands (at least nominally) of MG Mousa Arafat in Gaza and MG Haj Ismail in the West Bank. Yusif suggested that, depending on performance, either or both commanders could be moved to senior staff jobs under him, removing them from operational command of forces. Once he turns his attention to Gaza, he would move his headquarters there to maintain more effective operational control over what he said is a far more difficult task than subduing the West Bank. The other two security branches would be under Interior Ministry authority, but operate under the direct operational control of their designated chiefs, who would report to the interior minister. The Mukhabarat, which is currently outside the Interior Ministry, and the PSO, which is technically already part of Interior, would be limited to gathering and developing intelligence only, rather than taking actions in the field as they currently do.

12. (C) Every commander, Yusif said, would be given a chance to demonstrate his competence -- "even Mousa (Arafat)." If the commander does not perform as instructed or up to expectation, then that commander will be removed, Yusif said. He cautioned, however, that to hold each and every person responsible for actions during the Intifada would be a recipe for failure as no one would be clean enough. Arafat's legacy is that almost everyone is tainted by how they were forced to operate for the last 40 years. Yusif was nonetheless confident that there are sufficient competent people with whom he could effectively staff a ministry.

And What About Dahlan?

13. (C) Yusif was skeptical that Muhammad Dahlan would or should again have a position of authority in a future Abu Mazen administration. Dahlan has no experience, Yusif said, and failed in his previous tenure as minister of state for security. As an example of Dahlan's lack of stature, Yusif cited the November attack on Abu Mazen in the Arafat mourning tent in Gaza City, which took place while Dahlan was "standing right there." Many more-senior and more competent officers stand ahead of him, both in rank and within Fatah, Yusif continued. Furthermore, "you can't talk about corruption without talking about Dahlan." Yusif opined that Dahlan might again rise to a senior position in the next 10 to 15 years. In the near term, however, the only way for Dahlan to move ahead would be for the Fatah Conference to elevate him or else for him to successfully run for a seat in the PLC.

14. (C) Noting that the GOI and others had pressured Abu Mazen into bringing Muhammad Dahlan into Abu Mazen's previous government to run security, Yusif said that Abu Mazen must be able to appoint someone whom he trusts and with whom he can work. That relationship will be extremely important

throughout the spring and summer months, as the security services must be able to ensure law and order during the municipal elections, PLC elections, and then the Fatah Party Conference.

Showing Results Towards Peace

15. (C) Yusif warned that "extreme measures" might, at times have to be taken in the order to assert control and revive the unity of the legitimate armed forces, in Gaza in particular. Yusif said that he would expect "reasonable help" from the GOI in his endeavor. The Palestinian people, Yusif continued, are not capable of swallowing any more hardships, defined as either "Israeli aggression" or PA "disorders and failures." The situation has long been untenable, but now must certainly be resolved before the Fatah conference in August, Yusif said. "The Palestinians must take decisions then. Should we proceed with the peace with Israel or not?" A portion of that question would be answered by Israeli actions in the coming months, he said. The best option would be for the Party Conference to be held simultaneously with a resumption of the political track, so that the PA leadership could show the people some results.

16. (C) BIO NOTE: Yusif, who appeared in good health and was once a hearty eater, declined to eat any meat during lunch, citing what he said was a diagnosis that he suffers from excess "uric acid." He now eats only vegetables and fish. He described no other symptoms or conditions affecting his health or capabilities.

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